splendor in the sand

by david andrews

photographs by jack boucher

"A lot of desert rats would claim the beauty of Death Valley is the lonesome, windswept plains of the floor, miles and miles across," says Jack Boucher of the Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service. Yet here sits splendor in his camera's crosshairs, in the cool

***Right:** West side gate to Scotty's Castle.*

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Left: View of east gate, looking north.

remove of the folded and crumpled flanks that rise up on the northern rim of the country's hottest spot. It's a whole lot of somewhere, in the middle of nowhere.

The road out of Furnace Creek, park headquarters and the nearest civilization—near as low as you can go in this blistered trough—rolls north through a blaze of sand and a horizon always just out of reach, ashimmer in a haze of heat. These hills are a litany of lives lost looking for the elusive. Hell's Gate . . . Deadman Pass . . . Coffin Canyon . . . the signposts testify to hard-begotten dreams and men gone mad with thirst. It's a place haunted by the spirits of short-lived mining towns, where the fact has yet to catch up with the legend.

On the valley's north perimeter, the road slants up into the hills, leaving behind the blanching radiance of the salt flats, winding through washed-out gullies on its ascent into Grapevine Canyon. A cloud's shadow caresses the slope, alight with ocher and streaks of red. "Scotty's Castle" says a small sign, with an arrow to the right. Through an arroyo, the road empties onto a sheltered plateau, an oasis alive with palm trees, the sound of water, and a castle straight out of *A Thousand and One Nights*. "And you think you're in the Alhambra," says HABS chief Paul Dolinsky. "You think you're in Seville or Granada." Looking at something out of a Hollywood dream.

"Here's this Mediterranean style building and there are no bodies of water anywhere," says architect Joseph Balachowski, who spent a summer with the HABS team, drawing the place to perfection. "Then you get inside and start hearing the story of the place. It's amazing that anything got built at all."

The castle is named for a con man, Walter Scott, whose legend sprang to life in the inhospitable soil during the waning days of gold dust fever. "Death Valley Scotty" mined a new ore—publicity—and the castle was his greatest con.

The Art of Mythical Mining

Walter Scott learned chicanery during a 12-year stint as a rodeo rider for the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, touring America and Europe while studying at the feet of promoter Major "Arizona John" Burke. "Scotty absorbed the nuances of every ruse and stratagem employed by the wily publicist," says Hank Johnston in *Death Valley Scotty: The Fastest Con in the West*. "It was an education in the art of showmanship unavailable at any university."

Scott earned his spurs peddling mythical mines. After leaving Buffalo Bill's employ, he set about selling stakes to a roll call of the well-heeled. His was a sleight of hand with the way of the word. "The young farm boy from Kentucky [had] a self-confidence and assurance that belied his modest upbringing," says Johnston, polished by the trips abroad. "[He] could hold his own in nearly any company."

Between 1904 and 1905, Scott erected an edifice of himself worthy of the annals of Hollywood press agentry, husbanding his stakes for a series of southern California spending sprees. His goal: a bankable image.

"He took suites in the finest hotels, overtipped lavishly at every turn, and always paid his check with a large denomination bill," Johnston says. "To encourage easy recognition, he affected a blue flannel shirt, a flaming red necktie, a black Stetson hat, and an oversized ulster, the spacious pockets of which he said were 'filled with ore from his Death Valley mine.' A master of the 'Chicago roll,' Scotty could spend a hundred dollars and make it seem like several thousand during his brief forays."

The *Los Angeles Examiner* splashed his name across the front page in a series of flamboyant articles. "Since his stay in the city, Scott has been pulling big bills from every pocket whenever the idea of a fresh cigar or other investment strikes him," wrote Charlie Van Loan, a hustling young reporter who later pled no contest to bending a fact or two. "He seems to have a horror of small change. A bill for a hundred is the smallest piece of currency he can stand . . . The sight of 'chicken feed' seems to give him a pain."

Gold-minded L.A. devoured the mystery miner with the bonanza strike seemingly in his back pocket. Between promotional binges, Scott retreated to his Death Valley shack, enhancing his image by his

Timbered Ties **Spanish Colonial Revival**

IN THE 1920S, romance ran riot in the streets of southern California. Country clubs and gas stations, city halls and dance halls, mansions and bungalows put on the garb of the Spanish Colonial Revival. The crenelated rooflines, the gilded stucco cartouches, the bulbous domes, the creamy limestone door surrounds—all became the fashion. CALIFORNIA WAS the colonial stepchild of Spain, the myth went, which, except for a few cities, was "very nearly as medieval as when Columbus visited the court of Ferdinand and Isabella," says Elizabeth McMillian in *Casa California*. Shielded for centuries by the Pyrenees, Spain was the ideal substitute on the architectural grand tour as World War I ravaged the rest of Europe. In an instant, California had a European pedigree. "THIS PARTICULAR FORM of romanticism should not be looked upon as a form of escapism, but rather as an indication of the triumph of the child over the adult," says David Gebhard in his foreword to *Casa California*. "Many adults felt that they no longer had to put on the 'false' guise of adulthood; they could see and experience the world with the purity and delight of a child." THE STYLE SNUBBED American influence for the farmhouse of Andalusia, foremost among inspirations. Architects and clients mixed and matched elements from widely distributed picture books. When the mood struck, they looked to the Pyrenees hill towns or the island of Majorca, stirring in a dollop of Italy or France as taste desired. FROM THE MOORS came the severe, fortress-like face with a surprise inside. "Their castles, palaces, mosques, bazaars, hospitals, and caravansaries display sharp contrast between a plain exterior and an exquisitely ornate interior," McMillian says. "This characteristic continued, in permanent form, the tradition of the Moorish nomad's tent, which was richly decorated inside with handwoven textiles and brass lamps." THE VERNACULAR had gone uptown. Movie stars and sets spread the rage.

Below: ***Hall in the main house; circular stair in northeast tower.*** *Right:* ***Entrance.***

absence. A grab bag of dodges kept his backers at bay, among them staged gunfights eminently suited for headline treatment.

Then, for an entire month in the spring of 1905, he flashed his face in suites at two of the top hotels in Los Angeles. Calls about the "Desert Midas" swamped the switchboards, with one of the bar managers acting as his informal secretary. Scott seemed to be flinging more cash than ever, and getting more glory too.

He outsmoked this gambit with a hoopla-grabbing rail run, surreptitiously funded by the mysterious promoter E. Burdon Gaylord. The "Coyote Special" dashed over eight states and territories from the Pacific to the Great Lakes—changing engines nineteen times, traversing every terrain—on its way to a speed record that stood until the days of the diesel streamliner. Front pages across the nation shouted his name in bold type. His stock soared. "In view of his costly railroad trip," recalled one of his backers, "I now suspected that Scott really had some sort of mine in Death Valley."

Eventually the boom went bust. By 1912, his star fading, Scott conjured headlines once more, announcing the sale of his mythical mine for a million dollars. The honed image finally collapsed. A Los Angeles doctor—owed for treating Scott's brother, accidentally shot in a faux gunfight—pressed for payment in court. A grand jury got a whiff of Scotty's latest caper, which smelled like a swindle. He eluded jail time, but not disgrace, as a decade of the con unraveled under questioning. "So the Scotty bubble has burst," reported the *San Francisco Call*. "It was once reported that he was a highwayman and that he secured his fabulous returns by robbery. But even that dubious fame is to be denied him. He appears, from his testimony before the Los Angeles grand jury, to be a cheat and nothing more, the type of crook who packs a lodging house with transient guests and then sells the place on the pretext that they are all permanent." Scott faded into the desert, 40 years old and penniless. Soon enough, the salubrious sands re-seeded the legend.

AND YOU THINK YOU'RE IN THE ALHAMBRA. YOU THINK YOU'RE IN SEVILLE OR GRANADA. *—PAUL DOLINSKY, CHIEF, HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE*

Buying into an Icon

"Storybook come to life." That's what backer Albert Johnson bought into, more than the worthless wildcat mining stock. A multimillionaire, he got to like hanging at Scotty's mining shack—a few weeks' respite every winter from the Chicago climes and his cold marble mansion on the lake.

Johnson was born affluent, the son of a banker and industrialist. Equipped with a Cornell engineering degree, he went west in 1895, eager for mineral investments, then smitten with the allure of the place. In 1899, he severely wracked his back in a Colorado train wreck, a seemingly permanent disability. He gave up the rugged frontier for the Windy City, making a mint in the insurance business. Al was punctilious—every penny's expense recorded in a pocket notebook—and straight-ahead—no smoking or drinking, no swearing or carousing, no card playing or theater-going, no reading the paper on Sunday.

Yet he loved fast cars and fine furnishings, and was a sucker for tales of hidden treasure. "The hardest sort of bargainer in conventional business matters, he seemed to have a blind spot when it came to get-rich-quick promotions," Johnston says. Enter Walter Scott.

In October 1904, Scotty was in Chicago, trolling for a grubstake from a promoter, who, short on cash, put him on to Johnson and his investment partner. Eventually, when returns didn't show, Johnson went to the desert to investigate the mysterious mine. Scott took him to "a few dry holes." But the vigorous climate renewed his health; the stark beauty stirred his spirit. Hiking, camping—even riding and roping—got to be a habit. So did the return trips. The sham? Never mind.

"Johnson dearly loved mystery and mystifying," recalled Alfred MacArthur, an executive

Timbered Ties **Rancho Revival**

THE RANCHO recalls California's real roots—"those of the soldier of Spain, the Spanish Don, the Mexican politician, the deserter from a British brig-of-war, the merchant from Boston, the fur trader, the American soldier, the adventurer, the pioneer," said architect Cliff May, who later popularized the offshoot suburban ranch house. "But the greatest and most lasting influence on the blueprint brought into California was the way of living developed by the Spanish colonists." THE FRIARS brought their handtools, their hinges and nails, their recollections of 18th-century Spanish glory. Over time, the rancho style embraced the influence of the Southwest mission, the board-and-batten pioneer house, and the Indian abode. IN THE 1920S, Hollywood mirrored and amplified a Rancho Revival. Will Rogers and William S. Hart erected unassuming courtyard compounds with stables and riding areas. Onscreen, Zorro and his ilk swashbuckled through a world of stitched tablecloths, hand-painted spindleback chairs, rough-hewn vigas, and peeled-log columns. TINSELTOWN WAS never the same.


DEATH VALLEY

Left: ***Porch in the main house.*** *Below:* ***The Johnsons; details from the east gate.***

at Johnson's insurance company, National Life. "Apparently he harbored no resentment because Scott fooled him—probably admired him for it."

So every winter, Johnson shed the prosaic garb of the insurance game for a dime-store western getaway. He unlaced the puritan upbringing, duding up with pearl-handled six-guns and hand-tooled white-leather chaps. Or tricking out as a state trooper. Here he is in jodhpurs and jackboots, hand on holstered shooter, with badge and bullmoose hat, official duds courtesy the state of Nevada.

Scott made him a big shot, said MacArthur, "a man of mystery and quite a figure in certain circles."

Johnson was living large. The desert digs needed expansion.

Theater in the Desert

Part of the Chicago banker set, Johnson's wife, Bessie, wanted space to entertain if she was going to be out there. Her husband surreptitiously scooped up land, 1,500 acres by the early '20s.

He hired Frank Lloyd Wright to design a place, but the architect's sketches resembled not a luxurious home, but an abstraction of an adobe church. The couple, both extremely religious, may have nudged Wright in the ecclesiastical direction. Bessie hosted one of evangelist Paul Rader's radio shows, dispensing spiritual advice for young women. "She thought she was going to hold forth every Sunday from a Wright pulpit," Balachowski says. "Fortunately it was never built. It had this huge south-facing window, which would have made it an oven."

Architect Charles Moore once said that "to make a place is to make a domain that helps people know where they are and by extension who they are." Johnson had romance in mind for his place.

"Spanish Provincial," Bessie called the style. But what they built hailed from all over the Mediterranean, with stops in pueblo country and Hollywood (see sidebars). "Like East Coast anglo-colonial imagery, Hispanic-Mediterranean forms incorporated a wide variety of design references," says David Gebhard in his foreword to Elizabeth McMillian's *Casa California*. "They could be sentimentally romantic to the hilt or as opulent as one might desire; or, on the other hand, simple, primitive, and vernacular, closely akin to the emerging modern imagery of the time." Or all of the above. "We build as fancy leads," said Johnson.

The site was his greatest asset, at 3,000 feet sequestered between the desert scorch and the mountain snows. An abundant spring fed the wild grapevines that gave the canyon its name. It was a stark backdrop for drama, although Scott, the resident star, didn't spend a dime on it.

THE HARDEST SORT OF BARGAINER IN CONVENTIONAL BUSINESS MATTERS, [ALBERT JOHNSON] SEEMED TO HAVE A BLIND SPOT WHEN IT CAME TO GET-RICH-QUICK PROMOTIONS. *—HANK JOHNSTON*

Charles Alexander MacNeilledge, a Los Angeles architect simpatico with Johnson's ideas, oversaw the design. An imposing crew—100 at full strength—assembled for the task. Most, says Johnston, were "local Shoshone Indians, whose drudging manual labor at $2.50 a day served in lieu of mechanized equipment." Los Angeles employment offices supplied an array of craftsmen—cabinetmakers, carvers, and the like—for $5 to $11 a day. "Keeping these artisans on the job in the austere surroundings presented a continuing challenge," Johnston says. "Wholesale defections accompanied nearly every pay day. Scotty always said it took three crews to make any progress, one coming, one going, and one working!"

There were other disincentives. "Johnson's wife was a teetotaler; Scotty anything but," says Balachowski (though she adored his "10 gallon hat and 10 gallon heart"). "He'd get some money and go down to L.A. to spend it on booze and women. The work crews were out there in the middle of nowhere—they needed some respite from the heat and isolation. Naturally they wanted to drink and carry on too. This was verboten as far as Bessie was concerned. That made for some problems."

So did Sunday mornings. Religious service—a must-attend for all except Scott and the Shoshones—saw Bessie, robes flowing, preach for three hours. Skip it and lose your job.

Out of this pain came a pleasure pavilion. It was a symphony of shape and texture. Turrets and balconies. Minarets. Cupolas. Bell towers. Medieval ceilings. Islamic arches. Hand-painted sheepskin drapes. Heraldic emblems. Images of bobcats, roadrunners, and snakes tooled into weather vanes or cut out of wall sconces. Bronze-studded figures of myth. A sundial with the face of Janus.

FRASHER FOTOS

And tile. Plain tile, decorative tile, a dance of pattern and size, the compound itself a parade of tile bonnets. "This is a tradition that's probably from Spain and certainly came up from Mexico," says Balachowski. "And there were a lot of tile companies in southern California." MacNeilledge acquired tons shopping on the continent, some still stacked in a tunnel under the unfinished swimming pool, designed to show off the stuff.

Inside, "you get a sense of processional intrigue as you move from space to space to space," says Dolinsky. "It's meant to pull you in. You look through a space to an enticing view beyond it. It's like peeling an onion. It's never, boom, you're in a room. You're always in a vestibule or other area first, then you step in."

I'M SPENDING AROUND $3 MILLION FOR MY CASTLE. BUT IT'S JUST A SHACK TO LIVE IN. WHEN I FINISH IT I'M GONNA SHOW THE WORLD THE GREATEST SUPPLY OF GOLD IN CAPTIVITY. MILLIONS WILL BE ON DISPLAY IN A GLASS CASE.
—DEATH VALLEY SCOTTY TO A GROUP OF REPORTERS

Step in the front door. "Death Valley Ranch" is engraved on a lintel overhead, entry framed by sidelights with carved spindles and decorative metal bosses. Most doors are slabs of tongue-and-groove redwood, hinged with hand-forged metal straps featuring desert designs like grapevine and cacti, seared with a blowtorch to darken and show the grain. "Antiqueing," they called it.

Age was highly prized, real or no. Plaster was layered and scored and layered and scored some more, to yield seemingly weathered contrasts of color and texture.

Many ceilings are slightly tented, open to reveal rustically carved beams and trusses; a double-height living room gives way to a cozier upstairs. Dazzling chandeliers play off plain ceiling and wall lamps.

Scotty's bedroom is a story unto itself. A hand-carved headboard depicts sheep and a mountain lion against a desert sunset, with lizard-shaped wall lamps and shutters with animal cutouts. Two gun shields, built into the walls, protect against intruders.

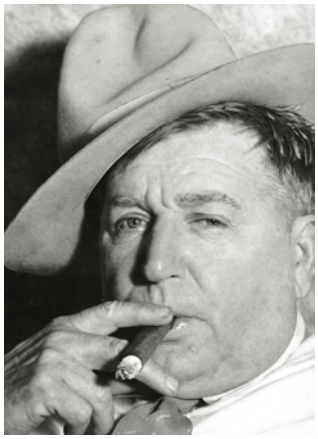
The Spanish suite shows off a bed that MacNeilledge acquired in Spain—believed over a century old—with its twin, duplicated by the craftsmen. In the Italian room, moonbeams dapple a Majorcan rug, thanks to custom lighting. The sea horse room features one of the premier materials in the place—wrought iron—with strap hinges depicting gulls, waves, and dolphins and a latch handle in the shape of a sea horse.

The music room, sumptuously arched, has an ecclesiastical flavor. A three-keyboard, fifteen-rank pipe organ sits amidst ornate beams alternating with acoustical paneling. In the corner, an octagon-shaped solarium boasts cross-ties carved with desert holly and pomegranate.

An observation deck is topped with a copper-capped cupola housing a beacon for the lost, crowned with a weather vane that shows a prospector leading his burro across the desert. "You go up the towers for the views," Dolinsky says. "They turn the house inside out."

Balachowski says, "This is inward-looking architecture, for the most part. You have thick walls and deep-set windows so the heat doesn't penetrate. Of course, it's all faux adobe, a wood frame structure with stucco on it. Made to look adobe." The walls were filled with Insulex, a powder expanded with water to 12 times its volume, shot through with tiny air cells like Styrofoam. Air conditioning is unnecessary even on 100-degree days.

Because of outer spaces like vestibules, the sun never quite heats up the inside. Yet, if you unshuttered the windows in mid-day, it would be very bright; there's little sense of claustrophobia. "A sense of coolness is one of the great successes of the site," Dolinsky says.



LOS ANGELES TIMES

Above: ***West facade; east side and dovecote, looking southwest; Death Valley Scotty.*** *Right:* ***Detail of loggia.***

Left: ***The view from the bushes.*** *Below:* ***Pinnacle on the northwest side.***

"You really feel it with the terra-cotta floors."

You feel it outside too. "It's a mirage of green, a green lawn with green palm trees," he says. "But as soon as you step beyond the perimeter, it's poof, you're in the middle of the desert."

Every nook and cranny is carefully crafted; anything that did not meet with approval was torn out and rebuilt—as many times as necessary. The furniture alone is a work of art.

"Overdone? Not at all," Dolinsky says. "It has absolutely the level of detail that it should have. It's exactly as you would expect. You want the muscular tie beams. You want the exquisite tile." Adds Balachowski, "It's opulent, but opulent in a polite way, not like, say, the Biltmore. There aren't any rooms so huge that you get lost in them. It's like a nice, big house. It's intimate."

Scotty called it a "castle"; soon enough it was "Scotty's Castle."

New Life in Death Valley

Scott retook the stage. In for a decade, out for a decade, back in again, revived like a rock star. Times were ripe—it was an overscale age of sports giants and giant-size gangsters. "The twin gods, Science and Prosperity, had made self-indulgence the rule," Johnston says. "The extravagant antics of Death Valley Scotty fit like the proverbial glove."

The era was noted for "the unparalleled rapidity and unanimity with which millions of men and women turned their attention, their talk, and their emotional interest upon a series of tremendous trifles," says Frederick Lewis Allen in *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (published a year after decade's end). Issues stirred little interest in the postwar mood for escape. "The national mind had become as never before an instrument upon which a few men could play," continues Allen. "And these men were learning . . . to concentrate upon *one tune at a time*."

Scotty stepped up to the mike. "I'm spending around $3 million for my castle," he told reporters. "But it's just a shack to live in. When I finish it I'm gonna show the world the greatest supply of gold in captivity. Millions will be on display in a glass case."

Johnson thought the masquerade splendid good fun, apparently. "I'm his banker," he said. Scott, a full-time resident, usually had the stage to himself. "His banker" was there only a few weeks a year.

Come summer, 1929, Scotty was firmly back in the saddle of public favor, a "standard page-one fixture" according to one account. In a lavish feature, the venerable *Saturday Evening Post* proclaimed: "All Death Valley is divided into three parts: Death Valley itself, the Death Valley mountains, and Death Valley Scotty. And the greatest of these is Death Valley Scotty."

The spotlight shifted soon enough as the Depression dashed the decade of euphoria. The castle, not quite finished, became a part-time tourist attraction, run by Bessie. Scotty remained a draw even beyond his death in 1954, his absence once again abetting the legend. The Johnsons, less well off but well off still, split their time between the desert and a home in Hollywood, Albert semi-retired. In 1943, Bessie died in a Death Valley car wreck, her husband at the wheel; he followed her in 1948. The National Park Service acquired the place in 1970. It quickly became a hot spot in the nation's hot spot, a diamond in a diamond-in-the-rough.

"Scotty's Castle is certainly one of the unique resources we have in the Park Service," Dolinsky says. "Having it in Death Valley is even more amazing." And that's not an understatement.

For more information, contact the National Park Service, Historic American Buildings Survey, 1849 C St., NW (2270), Washington, DC 20240, e-mail paul_dolinsky@nps.gov or jack_boucher@nps.gov. The HABS image archive is on the Library of Congress website at www.memory.loc.gov. Contact Scotty's Castle at Death Valley National Park, P.O. Box 579, Death Valley, CA 92328, (760) 786-3241, www.nps.gov/deva, e-mail marcia_stout @nps.gov.

Inside Guide **Methods of the Historic American Buildings Survey**

"I HAVEN'T SEEN A CAMERA like that in 40 years" is an oft-heard comment for lensman Jack Boucher, as he ducks under the focusing cloth of a rig that resembles something from Matthew Brady's day. It's not an antique, but a state-of-the-art Arca Swiss model that delivers razor-sharp 5" x 7" images to meet the Department of the Interior standards for documenting historic places. SUCH DOCUMENTATION is the subject of *Recording Historic Structures,* the latest edition of the HABS guide for producing measured drawings, compiling historical research, and taking large-format photographs. Put together by staff architects, historians, and photographers, it's an inside look at the methods for capturing the entirety of a site. THE GUIDE FEATURES an array of case studies on mechanical systems, historic ships and bridges, vernacular architecture, and more. Also included are sections on computer-aided drafting, photogrammetry, and digital photography, illustrated with images from the HABS collection. RECORDING HISTORIC STRUCTURES is published by John Wiley & Sons through an agreement between the National Park Service and the American Institute of Architects. To order, go to www.aia.org and click "AIA Store."